

HOW TO ENHANCE SECURITY AND SITUATIONAL PREPAREDNESS IN REAL ESTATE



Strengthening security and preparing for emergency situations remains a top priority for property managers as we move toward 2025. Reflecting on the tragic [Georgia mass shooting](#) this past September at Apalachee High School—which claimed four lives and hospitalized nine—the importance of analyzing effective security strategies is clearer than ever. According to an in-depth investigation by [Mother Jones](#) of all U.S. mass shootings since 1974, a significant number of active shooter scenarios occur in businesses and schools. In light of these findings, bolstering security protocols is critical not only in commercial and educational spaces but also in multifamily buildings and other residential areas, ensuring all property types are well-prepared and protected.

Despite the grim statistics that fill our news feeds with violent incidents that seem to happen more frequently than not, it is important to not become “paralyzed with fear.” This is what Zach Elmer, former CIA Operations Officer, FBI Special Agent, medic, assaulter and sniper emphasizes when he presented at the 2024 BOMA International Annual Conference. In Elmer’s riveting session, “Empowering Your Team Through Tactical Preparedness,” he shared the essential training he provides as Lead Instructor at [WilyRaven](#), including how to act in active shooter scenarios, specifically in the areas of situational awareness, physical protection and emergency medical response. Most importantly, Elmer shares his insights for how property managers can improve upon their existing emergency action plans, and how they can prepare their property, staff and tenants for worst-case scenarios.

This How-To Playbook is divided into four key sections:

- Introduction to Active Shooter Prevention: The Importance of Situational Awareness
- Insights From Security Experience: Emphasizing Security Protocols
- Developing Effective Emergency Action Plans: Balancing Security Measures with Accessibility
- Empowering Individuals and Communities: Teaching Practical Safety Strategies for Various Environments

In conversation with leading WilyRaven Instructor Zach Elmer, this guide assists property managers, security officers and commercial real estate professionals with the tools they need to live free of fear.

Introduction to Active Shooter Prevention

“Living free of fear” is WilyRaven’s motto. Elmer’s development of WilyRaven was created out of response to the 2017 Las Vegas shooting, one of the deadliest shootings in American history, in addition to the terrifying incident his son experienced the day after, when he had discovered a high school classmate had brought a gun to class. “Thanks to my son’s initiative to report this incident to a teacher, the situation was resolved. But understandably, despite this relief, my son didn’t want to go to school for a while, especially with the fear of retaliation,” Elmer shared. It was during a family conversation about the event when Elmer’s son had stated, “I wish you were there, Dad,” when Elmer realized the valuable knowledge he had that could not only empower his son — but others experiencing that same day-to-day fear. In Elmer’s training, he aims to empower teams and provide practical skills that help people feel capable of handling dangerous situations, while alleviating that fear.



“In my training, I focus on four key areas: increasing situational awareness, basic tactical movement, tactical emergency medicine, and firearms familiarization,” Elmer said. “I believe that many companies start with self-defense and firearms training, but I see that as backwards; those should be the last line of defense. My mantra is to first try to get out of a situation.” Situational awareness is the key factor Elmer encourages security personnel and property managers to prioritize.

Situational awareness, according to a source by [Global Guardian](#) is the “perception and comprehension of one’s surroundings or situation, coupled with the ability to project future events and make informed decisions based on that understanding.” The term, originally created in the context of military operations, was developed as a modern framework by Dr. Mica R. Endsley, Engineer and Former Chief Scientist of the United States Air Force (you can read more about this origination in this [Sage Journal](#)), who proposed a cognitive model that broke situational awareness into three levels:

- Perception: Observing your surroundings and taking note of change.
- Comprehension: Interpret your surroundings and determine if something seems out of place.
- Projection: Anticipating what will happen next and acting on these consequences.



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Situational awareness is certainly not new in the security landscape, but its expansion to office trainings and business development are. “To enhance situational awareness, I emphasize understanding your environment—what's normal and what's abnormal. If something feels off, knowing how to respond is crucial,” Elmer said. In Elmer's session from the Annual Conference, he shared a real-life example where he tested a security building's awareness and protocols when managing new visitors in the building.

“I entered a commercial building, where I wore casual clothes and carried a backpack, which I wanted the security officers to question from the beginning,” said Elmer. Below are the two different experiences Elmer had with office building security.

- *Office Building 1:* “When I entered the lobby, I had a positive interaction with a security guard, who noticed me right away. I took some photos of artwork, and they allowed it after checking. I then explored different floors, noting how security handled my presence. At one point, a guard approached me and reminded me not to wander around without permission. They were professional, but I was surprised they never asked to look in my backpack.”
- *Office Building 2:* “In this building, I posed as an architecture student taking photos, and the guard let me proceed without supervision, which raised questions about their security posture. I later spoke to the building's general manager at the Annual Conference session, who highlighted the gaps in their security.”

Both experiences underscore the importance of situational awareness in various settings, including office buildings, multifamily residences, retail spaces and healthcare facilities. According to Elmer, his takeaway from this experience was that many commercial buildings have moved away from having a dedicated security desk at the front.

“In the past, access to elevators often required a pass or some form of screening,” Elmer said. “Today, this seems less common, likely due to a focus on convenience, but it compromises security. The lack of a visible security presence or information desk creates more opportunities for unauthorized access.”

Elmer emphasized that as security concerns grow, it's crucial for management companies to prioritize security over unrestricted access, finding a balance that protects personnel and the building.

Insights From Security Experience

Elmer's unique background as a multi-faceted security professional has equipped him with the essential knowledge to train individuals, families, businesses and schools on surviving mass shootings or other dangerous events. When asked about the level of security required for commercial, industrial or medical facilities, Elmer emphasized that security measures should align with the nature of the operation. For example, a warehouse may require more restrictive protocols, using physical barriers and entry-point personnel to control access, since visitors are typically unnecessary—unlike in a hospital setting. On the topic of medical facility security, Elmer shared his insights:



“Hospitals in the U.S. have traditionally allowed open access, which has its pros and cons. While it facilitates visits from friends and family, it complicates security,” Elmer said. “I recommend that hospitals consider restricting access to certain areas. For instance, unlike hotels, where staff won’t disclose a guest’s location, hospitals often provide that information, which can be problematic.”

In some areas, hospitals have begun to restrict open access. According to the [Association of American Medical Colleges](#), The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center, which “used to be like a lot of academic medical centers: wide open,” has significantly reduced the entrances and hallways accessible without a staff badge. Visitors are now required to log in with an ID, such as a driver’s license, and wear stickers indicating their authorized areas. Additionally, implementing violence prevention plans and staff training has led to “lower rates of violence than units without specific plans.”

Developing these plans is critical. According to a 2024 report by [National Nurses United](#), “employers’ failure to implement effective prevention strategies is exacerbating the staffing crisis as 6 in 10 RNs report having changed or left their profession or considered leaving their job due to workplace violence.” As a result of these incidents, National Nurses United provides the following suggestions for medical facilities: “To effectively identify and correct workplace violent hazards, employers must have a method to track and investigate violent incidents.”

In addition to this strategy, Elmer suggests his insights for improving security in healthcare facilities long-term: “I believe there should be more controlled access points, especially in emergency departments, and security should be present in lobbies to manage access effectively,” Elmer said. “This approach would funnel visitors through a help desk with security protocols in place. Although it would require significant changes, I think it’s worth considering for improved safety, but ultimately, each management team will need to evaluate their own situation.”

Amid the rise in violent incidents affecting healthcare workers in recent years, Elmer emphasizes the need for not only comprehensive emergency action plans in all buildings but also proactive strategies to prevent such incidents from occurring in the first place. “My experience in both the CIA and FBI taught me the value of working in a team-oriented environment,” Elmer shared.

“From this experience, I concluded that while having an emergency action plan is essential—covering responses to active shooters, evacuations, and medical emergencies—it’s equally important to address prevention. I suggest that emergency action plans should include protocols for recognizing individuals who seem out of place and outline how to respond to those situations.”

Developing Effective Emergency Action Plans

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) mandates that most businesses must have a written emergency action plan ([29 CFR 1910.38](#)). As noted by [Safety IQ](#), “not having one can lead to severe penalties.” A [report from OSHA](#) reveals that companies like Dollar General have faced fines exceeding \$15 million since 2017 due to safety violations. These examples underscore the critical importance of proactive safety planning, but also exposes companies to significant financial and reputational risks.

As Elmer indicated, crafting an effective emergency action plan is just as equally imperative as training for how to respond in emergency situations. According to [Global Guardian](#), two commonly implemented frameworks in situational awareness training are:

- OODA: Observe, Orient, Decide and Act
- SLAM: Stop, Look, Assess and Manage

Both the OODA and SLAM frameworks provide essential processes for navigating new situations. The Global Guardian source describes the OODA framework as particularly suitable for split-second decisions, while the SLAM framework is deemed more appropriate for workplace dilemmas that allow for thoughtful deliberation. The type of framework and training received by security personnel can vary based on the specific challenges they face.

According to Elmer, one of the essential facets of an emergency action plan is that it outlines necessary procedures, ensures that security staff understand their roles and clarifies the company's support and the limits of their authority. "This plan should be well-documented and regularly trained to maintain a high level of preparedness and professionalism," Elmer said. "In my training courses, I emphasize the importance of having clear protocols for security personnel in an emergency action plan, particularly regarding how to approach and escalate situations with individuals who seem out of place. Just as police forces have escalation procedures, security teams should be trained to handle interactions professionally yet firmly."

For instance, Elmer pointed out the significant differences in security personnel between the two office buildings he visited. He described the guard at the first building as armed and a former law enforcement officer, which instilled confidence in his ability to handle potential threats. In contrast, the security staff at the second building were dressed more formally, lacked visible weapons and appeared to lack a strong security background. These distinctions highlight the importance of hiring the best personnel and providing high-quality training for effective security.

In addition to security strategies for commercial buildings, these prevention plans should also extend to residential buildings. As reported by the [Washington Post](#), 12% of mass shootings occur in residences. The statistic above stated that it was 64%, making it essential for multifamily housing to be equipped with adequate security measures to protect residents. One valuable tip for property owners and managers from the [American Apartment Owners Association](#) is to develop a proactive security plan rather than implementing measures in response to specific issues as they arise. They recommend identifying cost-effective ways to mitigate security risks, addressing the highest priorities first and then tackling others as your budget allows.

One simple procedure that Elmer recommends for security personnel is to instill a protocol for managing new visitors in a building:

“If a security guard encounters someone they haven’t seen before, they could say, ‘Hey, I haven’t seen you before. Are you visiting XYZ?’ Then, they can explain that for first-time visitors, a quick bag check is necessary. This interaction can be brief, professional, and non-intrusive, ensuring that security is maintained without causing discomfort.” This approach addresses Elmer’s concern about the lack of bag checks and unrestricted elevator access at both office buildings he visited. He highlights the importance of balancing flexibility with effective security measures.

Empowering Individuals and Communities

Elmer’s training, which teaches practical strategies for various environments, reinforces the importance of having skilled personnel on site. “Human interaction is irreplaceable for assessing threats and ensuring a comfortable environment for visitors,” Elmer said. “As technology advances, we still need that human element, especially since management companies must balance financial concerns with security needs. Ultimately, the risk of not having experienced personnel can outweigh the costs, particularly if an incident occurs and the company faces repercussions for inadequate security.” This insight aligns with findings from the [International Security Journal](#), which provides multiple benefits of physical security for properties:

- **Crime Deterrence:** Access control systems, surveillance cameras, and well-structured security protocols discourage potential intruders, reducing the risk of theft, vandalism and unauthorized access.
- **Reduced Insurance Costs:** Insurance companies often provide financial incentives, such as discounts, for properties with robust security measures due to the lowered risk.
- **Safety and Well-Being:** Physical security fosters a profound sense of safety among occupants, whether they are employees, students, or residents.
- **Data and Asset Protection:** Physical security measures protect the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of critical data, safeguarding businesses from data breaches and cyber threats.
- **Public Trust and Reputation:** Visible physical security, including personnel, surveillance cameras and access controls, enhances public trust.

In addition to strengthening your property’s security components, Elmer stresses the weight of developing and adhering to established protocols. “From a liability perspective, following established protocols can protect the company, providing documentation that shows due diligence was exercised in case of an incident,” Elmer said. “Overall, having these protocols in place is beneficial for both security and the company’s accountability.”

Alongside these protocols, the American Apartment Owners Association suggests a balance to security and to not look for “quick fixes or ‘magic bullets’ that may feel good but only marginally increase security.” For instance, while technology can significantly aid security efforts, it does not diminish the influence of a physical security presence in a building. Elmer explains:

“Technology cannot replace the experience of trained security personnel, especially those with law enforcement or military backgrounds who understand how to navigate uncomfortable or potentially dangerous situations. While physical barriers and badge access can enhance security, most commercial buildings aren’t willing to implement such extensive measures (because it hampers the welcoming environment of their building. This is Management’s dilemma: finding the balance between making the building secure and making the building conducive to a business.)”

Ultimately, while technology plays a vital role in enhancing security measures, it is crucial to recognize the irreplaceable value of trained personnel in effectively managing security threats. This understanding paves the way for exploring innovative strategies that integrate both technological advancements and human expertise in building safety and security.

“If I had to emphasize one key aspect of prevention in commercial buildings, it would be having well-defined security protocols and an emergency action plan,” Elmer said. “Personnel should be trained regularly and have the experience necessary to manage threats. Additionally, I suggest implementing audit procedures, similar to secret shoppers in retail, to evaluate how well security measures are being followed. This could help ensure that protocols are effective and that personnel are held accountable for their performance.”

Overall, Elmer aims to further his mission of equipping people with the knowledge they need to act decisively and alleviate anxiety about potential threats. “I want to foster a mindset shift towards proactive thinking about personal safety, empowering individuals to take simple steps that can significantly enhance their security across various environments.”

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